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Sandinists exploited pope, ex-officer says

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WASHINGTON — A former intelligence officer in the Sandinist government says that the Nicaraguans attempted to use Pope John Paul II during his March visit to legitimize the revolution in the eyes of the world.

Miguel Bolanos Hunter, a former Sandinist counterintelligence officer, reported the plan yesterday during a Washington seminar sponsored by a conservative religious group, Institute on Religion and Democracy.

Hunter spoke to a luncheon meeting of the seminar on religious freedom. The two-day seminar ended last night.

The former officer said that Sandinist officials tried to capitalize on the pope's trip by keeping Catholics from entering Managua Square, where the pontiff was to say Mass.

"The Catholics were in their churches praying for two days before the pope arrived, and Sandinist mobs surrounded the churches and kept them from going to the square until after the square was opened," said Hunter. He added that the square was also closed until an hour before the pontiff's arrival.

In the meantime, he added, Sandinist forces in civilian clothes filled the square behind the mothers of Sandinists slain in the military coup that ousted the former president, Anastasio Somoza Jr.

During the pope's Mass, the forces pushed the mothers onto the stage where the pontiff was and chanted pro-Sandinist slogans.

"They took the pope's microphone and said the slogans. When the Catholics at the rear of the crowd tried to protect the pope, said Hunter, "they were held off by someone with a loaded AK-47 rifle."

Hunter, who said he was trained in Cuba three years ago, said that the Sandinists have begun a program to undermine the Catholic Church in Nicaragua.

He said Sandinists have entered the Catholic priesthood in a long-range plan that has targeted the hierarchy and ultimate control of the Nicaraguan church.

"They have placed double agents as priests in the Catholic Church. Their plan will take years, but it will lead to a secure junta."

Also, he said, Catholics are hindered in their liturgies and the government allows full freedoms to Protestant evangelicals who have not taken political stances against the regime, as have Catholic leaders.

Hunter's theme that religious freedom is being thwarted by a leftist government is part of the seminar's overall theme that there is no religious freedom in communist lands.

EXCERPTED